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An Asian Perspective Of Intercultural Communication: The Buddhist Tradition

The continuing changes toward increasing interaction with other cultures are felt in almost all societies. This trend is particularly noticeable in countries like India, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and the United States. As we move toward a global world such trend will continue (Applebaum, 1994). The educators, corporations, politicians, and the scholars are recognizing the fact that we need to develop skills to communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultures have their unique way of influencing our life, behavior, and the way we communicate with each other. While we may not always recognize culture's subtle influence on human behavior, we generally are aware that it guides the way we perceive the world around us and the way we interact with each other. The influence of culture can be observed at least in three areas of communication, intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, and intercultural communication.

Most of us feel comfortable in our own cultural patterns because anything which is familiar is no threat to our comfort zone. Our comfort zone encompasses our personality as well as our culture. The newness and the unknown elements of other cultures present serious barriers in communication. But the need to communicate with people from different cultures cannot be ignored as the demand to adjust with changing times will continue.

It is obvious that we need a variety of communication perspectives to cope with the challenge of globalization. In the field of communication most of the theories, concepts, and per-

spectives focus primarily on western views of intercultural communication. Few of the existing concepts have articulated the theoretical relationship of intercultural communication to the tradition of Asia which offers an insight into the holistic nature of human beings - the body, the mind, and the consciousness (Capra, 1973). This paper attempts to address this need. It integrates the process of intercultural communication with the Buddhist holistic tradition of Asia.

The paper does not attempt to explicate Buddhism as religion or philosophy. It will instead, point the reader to a communication aspect of Buddhism. The portrayal of Buddhist perspective in this article is based on the author's participant observation, the interpretation of interviews' content pertaining to this paper, and the works of scholars like Nakamura's *Ways of Thought of Eastern Peoples* (1964), Oliver's *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China* (1971), Northrop's *The Meeting of the East and West* (1963), Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975), and Suzuki's *The Essence of Buddhism* (1968).

In this article, I first present a brief description of a possible parallel between Buddhism and Systems' Perspective in communication. I next present a brief portrayal of Buddhism. Third, I delineate some of the responses and comments made by the participants in the study, and I finally examine some of the short stories in Buddhist literature offering global implications for intercultural communication.

An association can be made between General Systems Perspective in communication and the Buddhistic approach to human interaction. Like the General Systems theory, Buddhist perspective is a conceptual framework on a abstract level (Kim, 1965b). Just as the General Systems emphasizes the holistic nature of system, Buddhist perspective stresses the holistic nature of the whole Universe. The General Systems' assumption of the dynamic interaction among the system's parts can be noted in Buddhist's reference of dynamic interdependence of things, events, and individuals in the Universe. In General Systems, individuals are understood to function through ongoing interactions with the environments. Somewhat similar idea is expressed in Buddhist tradition that in Nature the ongoing interaction moves through constant change; nothing is ever static or fixed. Thus the nexus of Buddhism is that change is fundamental and interdependence is unavoidable.

Buddhism—a perspective in communication

The origin of Buddhism is rather obscure partly because it relied on oral tradition. What is certain however, is that in about the sixth century B.C. in India there lived an exceptionally influential personality whose spiritual influences was felt throughout Asia and beyond. This personality was Gautama, the founder of Buddhism. He was born a prince in the kingdom of Sakya located on the southern slope of Himalayas near the northeastern border of India (Oliver, 1971). There is a legend in Buddhism that at the time of Buddha's birth there was a prediction that he would forsake the worldly pleasures and would work for the welfare of humanity .

Through years of search for enlightenment, Buddha found The Middle Way that would avoid the extremes of asceticism and indulgence- he became enlightened. After his enlightenment, he was called Buddha. He shared his enlightened views with others and persuaded the people to follow the The Middle Way.

Buddha was among one of the few who understood the need of human beings and shared their pursuit of happiness. He sought to propagate the ideals and principles of peace, love, compassion, forgiveness, kindness, and non-violence in terms of the traditional local cultures.

Buddhist perspective consists of four principles. The first principle is: whenever we resist the flow of life and try to cling to the seemingly fixed forms of things, events, people, or ideas, we feel disappointed and frustrated.

The second principle is: our attempt to divide the perceived world into individual entities causes hopelessness and distress. The will to private fulfillment produces the state of "ego oozing". The desire to only personal fulfillment is a futile effort to become disconnected from the inherently connected world of humanity.

The third principle is: there is a way to end our distressing condition. We are capable of not being trapped in this vicious circle of repeated, frustration, and disappointment.

The fourth principle is: our goal in life should be to strive to overcome the tendency to be self-centered and see the importance of interdependence of things, events, and individuals.

In Buddhist tradition the needs of society and the needs of individuals are not isolated, they are interconnected. one affects the other. The behaviors which are good for one 's

associates are also beneficial to the individual (Swearer, 1971). Human intellect should be regarded as a means to experience the innermost nature of human consciousness. This idea of human consciousness is articulated by Watts, (1960:13) in his book, *The Spirit of Zen: A Way of life, Work. and Art in the Far East* while he quotes Korzlski, "Korzlski has called the 'un-thinkable' level of reality...the non-verbal, a totally indefinable world of the concrete as distinct from the abstract."

Method

The research technique used for this study was interviewing the participants in their familiar environment which allowed the researcher to examine the topic in its natural setting with due consideration to the participants. Doing research by asking open ended questions directly to the participants helps to share their individual perspectives rather than simply responding to what is on the researcher's mind. In present the focus was specifically on the personal experiences of the participants who have been the practitioners of Buddhist philosophical principles for many years. The participants were approached through an informal networks of friends and associates. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted.

Specifically the participants were asked to express their views on Buddhist tradition and its usefulness for multicultural societies. Altogether there were fifteen participants. Due to limited resources the study was confined to a small number of participants. The plan was that later, depending on the availability of the resources, the study would be expanded.

Five of the participants were from Japan who resided in the suburb of Tokyo; five from India who resided in Bihar; and five were from the United States who lived in Southern California.

Each participant was informed about the purpose and nature of the study. The interviews accompanied with open-ended questions enabled the respondents to express themselves freely without being influenced by any suggestion from the interviewer.

Findings

This section presents the comments made by our Japanese participants, stories told by the Indian participants, and the personal experiences of American participants.

Japanese participants' responses. Implied in the responses from the participants were the suggestions that Buddhist perspective is not a dogma, a creed, or a blind faith . . . it is primarily a method for self-realization by doing good to others. The following comments came from the Japanese respondents:

"Buddhist tradition encourages self-discipline, self-searching, silence and non-violence."

"It teaches to trust your self and others."

"I do not mind sharing the personal aspect of my life with you. I am a recovering schizophrenic. It is through Buddhist tradition that I am able to live a very fulfilling life, I enjoy to interacting with people."

"The beautiful thing about Buddhism is that it creates no separation, it promotes unity through kindness and cooperation."

"Yes, it is a complex view but simple enough to follow, it is a practical way of life."

"I think for today's society Buddhism has much to offer."

"It teaches the need for understanding, sharing, and caring."

Stories told by the Indian participants. The Indian participants in our study stated that one of the major means of communication in Buddhist tradition has been the parable. Here I summarize five of these stories.

The first story is on the importance of controlled speech. One time a disciple of Buddha asked him about some of the major characteristics of a devotee. Buddha's reply to the devotee was:

"Oh Bhikshu (monk) there are many characteristics of an ideal religious devotee; one of the most important traits, however, is the ability to be composed, controlled, and patient. Pay attention to what your fellow human beings are telling you. Because your speech is enhanced only when you listen carefully. The Bhikshu (monk) who speaks calmly and wisely is the ideal devotee."

One participant told the story about Buddha's mild mannered style of resolving conflict. "Two people were arguing about being religious without caring to understand the basic philosophy of a particular religion Buddha intervened and offered his following comment in a very mild manner. He

said," Well! my friend, it sounds like the mysterious beautiful woman you yearn to love; but you do not want to know who she is? What is her name? Where does she live? Sounds like you don't care, such attitude is just vain assertion." Buddha's point was that religion is much more than simple rituals, before one attempts to practice any religion, it is necessary to understand and respect that religion.

Buddha's support for justice and individual rights was explained through this story. In ancient India each village had its own council. Council members used to guard the freedom and rights of the villagers. One time the king of Magadh (a state in ancient India) planned to take away the power of councilmen lest they might question his authority. Buddha warned the king about the consequences of injustice and suppression. He cautioned the king about the people's inner strength that could overthrow the kingdom of Magadh.

A story about social discourse and audience analysis was shared by another Indian participant:

One time Buddha advised his disciple, " An individual who is not really interested in receiving wisdom but makes himself appear as if he wants to learn, be cautious of such a person. Such a person would try to make a mockery of your ideas. This type of individual is not interested in learning. He tries to gain your attention by empty expressions; you will be wasting your time and energy. Therefore one should learn the difference between those who are sincerely interested in learning and the ones who are only pretending to be interested in your ideas."

The American participants. The American participants in this study were asked to share their general impressions of Buddhist tradition. These participants were practicing Buddhists who resided in the suburb of Los Angeles. All of the American participants said that they have had very positive experience with Buddhist tradition.

These findings suggest that all the participants from three cultures, India, Japan, and the United States, had very high regard for the holistic and practical aspects of Buddhist perspective.

In Buddhist tradition, intercultural communication would be viewed as transitional experience. Adler (1982: p. 15) states, "it reflects a movement from a state of low self-

cultural awareness, to a state of high self-cultural awareness." This idea is elaborated by Suzuki, (1968, p. 18), "the idea is to pass beyond the world of opposites, a world built up by intellectual distinctions and emotional definitions; and to realize the spiritual world of non-distinction, which involves achieving an absolute point of view." Implied in Suzuki's statement is the idea that effort to maintain the balance between the opposites would help reduce the tension between individuals of conflicting views [of different cultural backgrounds].

Several scholars (Thompson, 1973; Elgin, 1981; and Adler, 1982) have expressed their wish for an image of [global common sense] which would carry the theme of combining the Western mechanistic approach to the holistic perspective of the East.

Conclusion

It has been my purpose throughout this article to recognize the Buddhist tradition as a practical Asian perspective for intercultural communication. To this end, I have attempted to examine the basic principles of Buddhist perspective on intercultural communication. I have also presented the views of many practitioners of Buddhism in three cultures, India, Japan, and the United States. As I said at the beginning of this article, my intention in this essay is not to explicate Buddhism as a philosophy or religion but to show that Buddhist perspective offers an approach to intercultural communication which is functional for a global society.

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